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From My Garden by H.E. Bates

One sodden February day nearly 40 years ago, H. E. Bates, 'together with the girl I was going to marry', stood in a Kentish farmyard looking at a disused barn. For months he had been looking for a dream house, but with only £400 to spend he realised there was no such thing. 'Suddenly, out of the February dreariness, the sun shines, falling pale gold on the stones of the barn, lighting the yellow fans of clinging lichen—and, without a word, you know that this is the dream.' From this granary, now looking like everyone's idea of a dream house, H. E. Bates writes our monthly gardening article

Certain flower names have strong evocative qualities and one of the chief of these, for me, is verbenas. For some reason, quite illogical, I always associate it with Verbania, that lovely stretch of Italian countryside beside Lake Maggiore which has been, since at least Roman times, much favoured as a mild resort. Consequently verbenas has, for me, a flavour at once classical and romantic, qualities which are reflected in so many of the family, of which there are some 80 species.

In fact verbenas, which looks as if it came straight out of a Latin dictionary, is said to derive from the old English word vervain, a native plant common enough on waste land in the south of England. This is a plant on which our pagan ancestors bestowed veneration, attributing to it all sorts of miraculous properties, medicinal and



No Medicine, Much Charm

otherwise. But the plant in fact has little or no medicinal value, unless you count the refreshing qualities of the leaves of the lemon-scented verbenas, which is still grown and loved in gardens.

Of the 80 or so species which are mostly natives of tropical and subtropical America, we grow in gardens not more, I think, than half a dozen. To these cultivation has added the well-known and excellent bedding varieties, their colours embracing scarlet, pink, purple, mauve and white and all of them rich on warm summer evenings with the typical light, delicate, swooning verbenas fragrance. Recent cultivation has also given us two glorious new hybrids, Verbenas Lawrence Johnston and Loveliness, of which I will say some more in a moment or two.

None of the verbenas is reliably hardy in this country but this need worry no one, since all, with the exception of the two new varieties already mentioned, are readily raised from seed. This particularly applies to Verbenas venosa, originally from Brazil. If I have sung the praises of this plant before I make no apology for doing so again, since I rate it as being, without question, the finest half-hardy perennial that can be raised and flowered as an annual.

The great virtues of *V. venosa* are its delightful violet heads of flower, borne on stiff roughish stems; its prodigious length of flowering time—from June until November; and its ability to do almost as well in a damp cool summer as in a hot dry one. Grown in a mass, as it should and

must be, its rich purple is a positively royal sight.

V. venosa also has a taller sister, *V. bonariensis*, a plant of fascinating architectural form, from 4 to 6ft high and with flower heads of slightly paler mauve. This also accommodates itself to our unreliable summers, although it too originates from Brazil.

Now for the two hybrids, *V. Lawrence Johnston* and *Loveliness*. They cannot be raised from seed but can only be propagated by cuttings, a process which gives no more trouble than shelling peas. The two varieties might well be dubbed masculine and feminine. *V. Lawrence Johnston* is the masculine one: strongly, warmly red, of an almost Mephistophelean colour. Unfortunately, unlike *V. venosa* it loathes both coolness and rain. But give it sun and sun and sun and heat and heat and heat and it will blaze into unparalleled glory.

By contrast *V. loveliness* is all feminine. Its flowers are of tenderest purest mauve. It has a retiring, almost virginal charm. This shyness unfortunately extends, in my experience, to its flowering ability and it never quite reaches the exuberance, even in good summers, of its masculine relation.

Your method with these two incomparably desirable things is to buy a plant or two of each and immediately start to work up a stock by the simple means of cuttings. Old outdoor plants must necessarily be potted up before the first frosts of autumn and wintered under glass, where they will need little or no heat. I find that spring cuttings are best and in March these cuttings will root with ridiculous ease. The old, over-wintered plants will provide batch after batch of cuttings, which can be inserted all through April and May with certainty that they will flower the same summer.

No, verbenas may not have medicinal properties of any great value; but when it comes to beauty, together with ease of cultivation, they haven't, in my view, many serious rivals. Nor, curiously enough, any diseases. Perhaps, after all, they have their own secret medicines for self-protection.

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